

CHAPTER 6

UNIFIED COMMAND

While a single IC normally handles the command function, an ICS organization may be expanded into a UC. As a component of an ICS, the UC is a structure that brings together the “Incident Commanders” of all major organizations involved in the incident to coordinate an effective response while at the same time carry out their own jurisdictional responsibilities. The UC links the organizations responding to the incident and provides a forum for these agencies to make consensus decisions. Under the UC, the various jurisdictions and/or agencies and non-government responders may blend together throughout the organization to create an integrated response team.

The UC may be used whenever multiple jurisdictions are involved in a response effort. These jurisdictions could be represented by:

- Geographic boundaries (e.g., two States, Indian Tribal Land);
- Governmental levels (e.g., Federal, State, Local,);
- Functional responsibilities (e.g., fire, oil spill, EMS);
- Statutory responsibilities (e.g., Federal Land Managers, RP OPA90 or CERCLA); or
- Some combination of the above.

Actual UC make-up for a specific incident will be determined on a case-by-case basis taking into account: (1) the specifics of the incident; (2) determinations outlined in existing response plans; or

(3) decisions reached during the initial meeting of the UC. The makeup of the UC may change as an incident progresses, in order to account for changes in the situation.

The UC is a team effort, but to be effective the number of personnel should be kept as small as possible. A well-defined process requires the UC to set clear objectives to guide the on-scene response resources.

The UC is responsible for overall management of the incident. The UC directs incident activities, including development and implementation of overall objectives and strategies, and approves ordering and releasing of resources. The UC is not a “decision by committee”. The principals are there to command the response to an incident. Time is of the essence. The UC should develop synergy based on the significant capabilities that are brought by the various representatives. There should be personal acknowledgement of each representative’s unique capabilities, a shared understanding of the situation, and agreement on the common objectives. With the different perspectives on the UC comes the risk of disagreements, most of which can be resolved through the understanding of the underlying issues. Contentious issues may arise, but the UC framework provides a forum and a process to resolve problems and find solutions.

A cooperative attitude and a thorough understanding are essential. So does a thorough understanding of the ICS IAP Cycle. Nevertheless, situations may arise where consensus agreement may not be reachable. In such instances, the UC member representing the agency with primary jurisdiction over the issue would normally be deferred to for the final decision.

The bottom line is that UC has certain responsibilities as noted above. Failure to provide clear objectives for the next operational period means that the Command function has failed. While the UC structure is an excellent vehicle (and the only nationally recognized vehicle) for coordination, cooperation, and communication, the duly authorized representatives must make the system work successfully. A strong Command--a single IC or UC--is essential to an effective response.

Each UC member may assign Deputy Incident Commander(s) to assist in carrying out IC responsibilities. UC members may also be assigned individual legal and administrative support from their own organizations.

To be considered for inclusion as a UC representative, your organization must:

1. Have jurisdictional authority or functional responsibility under a law or ordinance for the incident; and,
2. The incident or response operations must have impact on your organization's AOR; and,
3. Your organization must be specifically charged with commanding, coordinating or managing a major aspect of the response; and,
4. Your organization must have the resources to support participation in the response organization.

UC representatives must be able to:

- Agree on common incident objectives and priorities;

- Have the capability to sustain a 24-hour-7-day-a-week commitment to the incident;
- Have the authority to commit agency or company resources to the incident;
- Have the authority to spend agency or company funds;
- Agree on an incident response organization;
- Agree on the appropriate Command and General Staff position assignments to ensure clear direction for on-scene tactical resources;
- Commit to speak with “one voice” through the IO or JIC, if established;
- Agree on logistical support procedures; and
- Agree on cost-sharing procedures, as appropriate.

It is important to note that participation in a UC occurs without any agency abdicating authority, responsibility, or accountability.

What if your agency is not a part of the Unified Command? Here is how to ensure your organization’s concerns or issues are addressed:

- Serve as an agency or company representative.
- Provide input to your agency or company representative, who has direct contact with the LO.
- Provide stakeholder input to the LO (for environmental, economic, or political issues).
- Serve as a Technical Specialist in the Planning Section (reassigned, as appropriate).
- Provide input to a UC member.